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261526Z Mar 04

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001833

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/23/2014

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SUBJECT: TURKISH MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: THE VIEW FROM THE WEST

REF: ANKARA 1436

(U) Classified by Political Counselor John Kunstadter.
Reason: 1.4 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: The ruling AKP's chances of winning municipalities in the Aegean region is hampered by the party's uninspiring candidates. Rather than build support through intense door-to-door campaigning, AKP is relying on the popularity of P.M. Erdogan and the AKP "brand" to attract voters. A feckless opposition appears unable to mount much of a challenge outside of Izmir, historically a bastion of the center-left. End Summary.

2. (U) Poloff recently traveled to Izmir, Manisa, and Aydin provinces in Turkey's Aegean region, which is generally more affluent and closer in mentality to the West than the rest of Anatolia, and met with a variety of political and professional contacts to discuss March 28 municipal elections.

Izmir: Too Close To Call

3. (C) Our contacts in Izmir largely echoed what we have heard recently in Ankara, namely that the race in the Aegean city, historically a bastion of the center-left, could be close. Osman Gencer, chief editor of the regional daily Yeni Asir, asserted that both the ruling AKP and main opposition, center-left CHP are running a tight race. Citing business and other journalist sources, Gencer said that on any given day either party could be ahead in public opinion polls. Niyazi Memur, a senior provincial AKP official, told poloff that although AKP has its work cut out for it, the party has a "good chance" of pulling off a victory. Memur noted that AKP will do well in Izmir's poorer districts, which are overwhelmingly populated by internal migrants mainly from Turkey's Kurdish Southeast. Memur claimed that incumbent mayor and CHP candidate Ahmet Piristina has neglected basic infrastructure in those districts -- a charge we heard from many local businessmen -- providing AKP fertile ground for grassroots politicking.

4. (C) Not surprisingly, CHP Izmir provincial chairman Alaattin Yuksel confidently proclaimed Piristina will win the mayoralty again on March 28. Yuksel cited his party's own polling, which showed CHP ahead -- 40 percent to AKP's 32 percent. However, betraying fear that AKP is catching up to CHP, Yuksel prepared the ground for a possible CHP failure by making the same claims to poloff that CHP chairman Deniz Baykal made to Ambassador earlier this month (reftel): 1) the media is overwhelmingly biased toward AKP; 2) the party in power has an advantage in municipal elections; and 3) it is too early in the GOT's tenure for the Turkish public to judge AKP's performance, which Yuksel claimed has been poor across the board. Adding to the feeling of doubt, local CHP official Ulku Caner coily asked poloff whether there would be any military intervention against the GOT if CHP loses Izmir -- a symbol of Kemalist rectitude -- as if fishing for any sign of USG displeasure with AKP.

Opportunity Lost?

5. (C) One factor that is likely to work against AKP in the region is the lack of color in its candidates. In left-leaning Izmir, where AKP's success could hinge on its candidate's individual appeal and dynamism, the party chose previously unknown Taha Aksoy, described by supporters as an "honest businessman" and by detractors as a "nobody." The speeches we heard Aksoy make in Izmir were unimpressive. Compounding the problem Aksoy's bland personality presents is that AKP will have difficulties introducing Aksoy, because

the party waited until virtually the last minute to announce his candidacy. Indeed, Niyazi Memur conceded that AKP's biggest challenge is getting Aksoy's face and name out to people in time for March 28.

16. (C) For months our contacts on the political right in Ankara claimed that AKP had wanted to choose former DYP and ANAP M.P. Isilay Saygin as its mayoral candidate in Izmir. A life-long conservative politician -- she began her career in the Izmir suburb of Buca at the age of 25 and never married, saying she did not have time -- Saygin established a strong reputation for service and a common touch. Our Ankara contacts believed Saygin represented the kind of mainstream, energetic candidate AKP needed to unseat CHP in Izmir.

17. (C) Asked about Saygin's candidacy, Memur defensively claimed that Saygin never followed proper application procedures. He contended that, in any case, Saygin did not have strong ties to the AKP Izmir office or AKP's grassroots in the city. Saygin, he said, had hoped that AKP headquarters in Ankara would weigh in on her behalf, but that never happened.

18. (C) For her part, Saygin did not dispute Memur's accusations in a private meeting with poloff and noted that AKP headquarters actually undermined her candidacy in the end. She claimed that former ANAP deputies, now AKP ministers Abdulkadir Aksu, Cemil Cicek, and Erkan Mumcu had lobbied for her candidacy but that F.M. Abdullah Gul, whom she termed a "fundamentalist" -- rejected her candidacy outright. She suspected the influence of Milli Gorus, which Memur separately later acknowledged with reluctance. He said cryptically that although Milli Gorus has influence in Izmir, today's Milli Gorus "is not the same as in the past" -- a turn of phrase Milli Gorus-linked AKPers often use to suggest they are not as outwardly "Islamist" as they once were. Milli Gorus (MG) is the problematic, lodge-like movement of 1996-97 Prime Minister Erbakan. With links to Saudi, and in the past Iranian, money and with major support from a western European network principally in Germany and Belgium, MG wraps itself in Islamism and anti-U.S./anti-Israel rhetoric. However, MG is as much a money-making machine for Erbakan and his inner circle as a religious lodge in the more traditional sense.

Manisa and Aydin: AKP Winner By Default?

19. (C) In both Manisa and Aydin, where center-right parties have historically performed well, AKP may win through no effort of its own. As in Izmir, AKP has chosen uninspiring candidates and, based on our conversation with party officials, will rely heavily on the party's drawing power as the party of government. In Manisa, where AKP will face a strong challenge from an incumbent ANAP mayor, who has been successful and is confident he will win a third term, the local AKP boss Ramis Siyak could only say that the party's chances are "good." Despite prodding, he did not mention the AKP candidate once during our meeting and instead focused on Tayyip Erdogan's national appeal as the party's most critical asset. AKP officials in Aydin also did not discuss the merits of the party's candidate, the incumbent mayor who is technically still a member of ANAP. In a wide-ranging discussion with party hacks and local journalists, AKP provincial chairman Mehmet Erdem asserted that the party will win because of the government's nationwide popularity.

110. (C) Working to AKP's advantage in both cities is the weakness of the opposition in the region. Although AKP faces a stiff challenge in Manisa from the incumbent, other opposition parties are likely to have little impact on election day in either city. In Aydin, where DYP has historically performed well, the AKP candidate and incumbent mayor was confident that DYP voters would turn to AKP "as the only center-right party." In Manisa, CHP officials received us in a room full of T.V. cameras and tape-recording journalists in an obvious attempt to draw public interest to the party. In Aydin proper, CHP simply refused to meet with us, citing the press of business (party chairman Baykal was due in town the next day). In a meeting in Soke sub-province of Aydin, CHP officials were resigned to a poor performance nationally and hinted that the party base is ready for leadership change.

Women's Roles Still Circumscribed

11. (C) The Isilay Saygin episode described above highlights

an important issue for Turkish political life in general and one that is especially acute in AKP. The dearth of women candidates for AKP nationally -- some 18 out of over 3,000 possible municipalities -- reflects the persistent problem of women's socialization and participation in politics. During our discussions at the local level, AKP officials were at pains to point out the large and increasing number of women that they claim to have brought into the party ranks. Manisa's Siyak, for example, said that he made sure some 50 women -- 38 of whom have no headscarves, he pointedly noted -- became members of the provincial assembly. However, he could not explain why women have not occupied more influential positions in the party organization, simply noting that "very few women even applied to be candidates."

12. (C) AKP officials in Soke sub-province of Aydin echoed their counterpart in Manisa. Soke AKP chairman Kemal Ozbek said only a handful of women had applied for any of the sub-provincial mayoralties. The AKP supporters in attendance all acknowledged that there is a problem but none of the men present had any ideas as to how to address it. One member, clearly frustrated with a pointed line of questioning, sought to turn the tables, asking defensively whether women are involved in American politics. After all the men had spoken, the lone woman in attendance explained that AKP women face two challenges: 1) education -- a nationwide problem for women; and 2) self-confidence, which better education could enhance. If women feel more confident, she argued, they will be more inclined to be politically active.

Comment

13. (C) AKP may pull out victories in all three provincial capitals, although its chances of winning Izmir metropolitan municipality appear doubtful. In any case, our discussions in the region revealed three noteworthy trends in the party: 1) the paucity of energetic, three-dimensional AKP mayoral candidates; 2) the concurrent reliance on Erdogan and the party name to win votes as opposed to building up the personality of local party candidates; and 3) the absence of women on AKP ballots and in decision-making positions at the local level. Septels will show that these themes are not confined to the Aegean region. The fallout will have an enormous impact on AKP's ability to respond effectively to public demands, which will only increase on the party following its expected widespread victory March 28.
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